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Dale Martin

Livingston

A Railroad Town and its Depot

In the late-19th and early-20th centuries, railways dominated inland transportation and employed between one and two percent of the United States population. Railroads were the economic impetus for hundreds of division point towns, located along main lines at intervals usually between 100 and 150 miles. In these communities, railroads were a pervasive presence with their extensive properties, large work forces, and around-the-clock activity, focused around passenger stations. The depot in Livingston, Montana symbolizes the town's history as a major railroad town and gateway to Yellowstone National Park.

The Northern Pacific Railroad (NP) completed its main line from Minnesota to Puget Sound in 1883. After following the Yellowstone River westward for 340 miles, the NP's route diverged from the waters to ascend its first mountain barrier, the Belt Range. Between river and mountain, in 1882, the company platted the townsite of Livingston and laid out a division terminal: switchyard, roundhouse and repair shops; fuel and water structures; and passenger station with administrative offices. Livingston also became the operating base for several branches: the important line to the north edge of Yellowstone National Park, the Cokedale spur west of town, and the Shields River branch to Wilsall, Montana. Helper locomotives assisted westbound trains up to Bozeman Pass tunnel, 13 miles away and 1,050 feet higher. Livingston grew quickly and was, by 1890, the sixth largest town in Montana. After the NP's financial recovery from bankruptcy in the mid-1890s, growing traffic encouraged the company to build another passenger station in Livingston.

The new depot reflected Livingston's importance to the Northern Pacific. The St. Paul architectural firm of Charles A. Reed and Allen H. Stem designed the buildings in the Italianate

Yellowstone-bound train at the Livingston Depot, c. 1904. Photo courtesy the Warren R. McGee Collection.

style. Reed and Stem designed many depots used by the NP, including Union Stations in Seattle, Tacoma, and Butte, Montana. While they won the design competition for the Grand Central terminal in New York City, professional rivalries and Reed's death pushed their plans aside.¹ The Livingston depot's main block had two stories and a mezza-

nine. Waiting rooms and the ticket office occupied the ground floor and mezzanines, and the Montana Division headquarters were upstairs. A one-story satellite building on the east was a lunchroom open all hours, and a similar building on the west housed express and baggage rooms. A roofed colonnade linked all three structures. The buildings' exteriors featured red common brick framed within pilasters and trim of yellow-brown pressed brick, with beige terra cotta ornamentation and pillow-like portrayals of the red and black monad, NP's recently adopted corporate emblem. The station was completed in the summer of 1902 at a cost of just over \$100,000.² Every day during the next 30 years, up to 16 trains stopped at the depot.

By most measures, railroads in the U.S. reached their peak in the mid-1910s. In Livingston, the approximately 1,000 railroaders comprised one-sixth of the town's population. On the north side of town, the machinists, blacksmiths, boilermakers, and car repairers worked in NP's largest repair facilities between Minnesota and Puget Sound. In the station on the top floor, divisional supervisors, train dispatchers, telegraphers, and clerks oversaw operations from Billings, Montana on the east to Helena and Butte on the west. At train times, the platforms swarmed with crews, workers tending locomotives and cars, and station staff; carts stacked with baggage, express, and mail; and passengers sampling the mountain air. Six to eight daily main line passenger trains ran through Livingston, trains with names like the North Coast Limited, the Twin City Express, the Mississippi Valley Limited, and the Atlantic Express. These trains carried cars to Minneapolis, St. Paul, Milwaukee,



Chicago, Omaha, Kansas City, St. Louis, Denver, Seattle, Tacoma, and Portland.

Gardiner, the north entrance to Yellowstone National Park, was 54 rail miles from Livingston. From 1883 until 1908, the NP was the only railway to reach Yellowstone, a fact that the company made an integral part of its corporate identity and promotion. NP's monad emblem had "YELLOWSTONE PARK LINE" on its bottom edge from the mid-1890s until 1953. In advertisements, brochures, timetables, and the annual publication *Wonderland*, the NP emphasized Yellowstone National Park and its own importance in getting people there. Every summer, trains left Livingston for Gardiner with coaches, sleeping cars from distant cities, and, at the end, an open-sided observation car called the "rubber-neck car" by train crews.

The long American railway decline began after World War I. The rise of road transport and labor-saving rail technologies resulted in permanent cuts in operations and employment. The Great Depression accelerated changes. In 1932, the Northern Pacific abolished the division headquarters in the Livingston depot, dividing its responsibilities between offices in Glendive and Missoula, Montana. Main line passenger service fell in 1932 to the four daily trains that operated until 1971. The NP expanded the Livingston shops for new diesel-electric locomotives in the 1940s and 1950s and then, as the displaced steam engines were retired, demolished the 44-stall roundhouse. After World War II, the Northern Pacific stopped regular passenger service to its trademark destination. Daily summer trains to the edge of Yellowstone National Park ceased after the 1948 season, replaced by busses. Rare chartered passenger trains ran to Gardiner until 1955.

Livingston's position as a railroad town faded in the 1970s. In 1970, the Burlington Northern Railroad (BN) absorbed the Northern Pacific, moving Livingston in corporate rail geography. Located for almost 90 years near the center of NP's main line, Livingston found itself on a peripheral secondary line in the larger BN system. Amtrak took over most passenger trains in the U.S. in 1971, reduced service through Livingston to just six trains per week, and ended service in October 1979. BN ceased freight service to Gardiner in 1975 and dismantled the south end of the Yellowstone branch. The last BN workers vacated the Livingston station in 1982. After BN employment at Livingston reached a peak of 1,150 in the late 1970s, work at the locomotive shops declined until their closure in May 1986. Montana Rail Link began operations over Burlington Northern's former NP main line across southern Montana in October 1987, and moved the Livingston train crew base to Laurel, 100 miles to the east. One positive development, in June 1988, was the Livingston Rebuild Center's reopening of the shops to overhaul locomotives and freight cars.

As Livingston experienced rail decline, the community considered the acquisition of the former passenger station. In 1982, Burlington Northern announced its decision to donate the station to Livingston. Within several years, the Livingston Depot Foundation leased the station buildings from the city and arranged a five-year contract to serve as a summer-season satellite museum of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, in Cody, Wyoming. The extensive renovation, requiring over \$700,000 of government grants, local contributions, and BN money, included the reversal of mid-century alterations, strengthening the structure to current seismic requirements,

Railroad station at Livingston, Montana. Photo by E. V. Steadman, 1895, courtesy Yellowstone National Park.



and adapting it for museum use. The Livingston Depot Center was formally dedicated on July 1, 1987. The following year, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation and the U.S. Department of the Interior awarded the center a National Historic Preservation Award for the accuracy and quality of restoration.

The museum ended its affiliation with the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in the early 1990s and became an independent railroad museum. Every summer since 1993, the depot has housed "Rails Across the Rockies: A Century of People and Places," combining artifacts, photographs from retired conductor Warren McGee and Montana Historical Society collections, and an HO-scale diorama of Livingston's shops, yard, and depot. A variety of accompanying exhibits has also been mounted. In addition, the Depot Center hosts arts and crafts sales, an annual rail-roadiana swap meet, and blues concerts.

The Livingston Depot Center sits in an active railway setting. The east satellite building still is a cafe. On the north side of the Depot Center, Montana Rail Link's mountain railway hosts freight trains, helper locomotives, and yard switching. Occasional summer tour passenger trains pause by the depot. Across the switchyard, a 176-foot tall brick smokestack dominates the Livingston Rebuild Center shops. Although Livingston's economy is now largely dependent upon automobile-based tourism and outdoor recreation, the town's railway heritage remains alive in the station overlooking the busy tracks and the shops complex.

Notes

- ¹ Deborah Nevins, general ed., *Grand Central Terminal: City within the City* (New York: The Municipal Art Society of New York, 1982), 12-16, 23, 28, 142.
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